Over the past ten years, there has been a growing concern among healthcare professionals regarding sexual boundary issues and the increase in reported cases of healthcare providers interacting inappropriately with their patients.

Although it is frequently unreported, it is estimated that as many as 10% of health professionals have crossed sexual boundaries with their patients.



What is a sexual boundary violation?

- A violation of sexual boundaries between the healthcare provider and patient involves words, behavior or actions designed or intended to arouse or gratify sexual desires.
- Sexual or romantic relationships with a current or former patient in which the healthcare provider uses or exploits knowledge, emotions or influence derived from the professional relationship.
- 🧚 Off-color or suggestive humor.
- Any words, action or behavior that could reasonably be interpreted as sexually inappropriate or unprofessional.



Possible long-term effects to patients victimized by a sexual boundary violation

- Emotional turmoil
- Shame, fear or rage
- Guilt and self-blame
- Isolation and emptiness, disengagement from services
- Cognitive distortion
- Identity confusion
- Emotional liability
- Sexual dysfunction
- Mistrust of authority, paranoia
- Depression
- Self-harm
- Suicide

If a patient or someone you know has become a victim of a sexual boundary violation, we advise you to help them get mental health counseling immediately.

Consequences to Healthcare Professionals

- Possible fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct charges for sexual contact with a patient.
- In Michigan, fourth degree criminal sexual conduct is a misdemeanor punishable by up top two years imprisonment and a maximum fine of \$500 or both.
- Disciplinary action by the state licensing board.
- Loss of license or restricted license.
- Formal charges against the health professional.

If a patient
believes that
they have been
a victim of a
sexual
boundary
violation they



can:

- File a written ethical complaint with the District, State or National branch of the professional association of the healthcare provider or you can contact them by mail, telephone or email.
- File a complaint with the appropriate professional licensing board in Michigan

Preventive Measures for Health Professionals to avoid violating a sexual boundary

- Avoid sexual relationships with current patients, no matter what the circumstances.
- Avoid sexual relationships with former patients.
- Strive to avoid relationships with patients of the agency where you are employed.
- Avoid relationships with relatives or close friends of patients.
- Make use of supervisors and senior colleagues to provide guidance in navigating the turbulent waters of sexual ethical dilemmas.
- Do not accept gifts or non-monetary compensations for medical services from patients, as this may adversely affect maintaining a professional relationship.
- Avoid even simple acts of kindness, such as giving a patient a ride home or offering a small loan. This may give other patients the idea that the practitioner is giving "special" treatment to the individual or could be seen by the patient as encouraging a personal relationship.
- If you need guidelines involving the potential of crossing a sexual or professional boundary with a patient, contact your State Licensing Board or professional organization.

To Report a Sexual Boundary Violation Involving a Colleague, or to Help Your Patients Report This:

- File an allegation with the appropriate professional licensing board in Michigan by contacting www.michigan.gov/mdch and select "Health Systems and Health Profession Licensing" and then "Complaints", both of which are on the left-side of the page. This section of the website will provide you with all of the information needed to file an allegation with the State of Michigan.
- Division/Allegation Section of the Bureau of Health Professions at (517) 373-9196 for information and personal assistance.



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Sexual Boundary Awareness For the Health Professionals

